INTERVIEW WITH DR. WILLIAM PRUITT
MAY 20, 2003 BY ROGER KAYE

MR. KAYE: This is a telephonic interview with Dr. William Pruitt. He is in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It is being conducted by Roger Kaye with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in Fairbanks, Alaska on May 20, 2003. Dr. Pruitt thanks so much for your willingness to talk to me today. I'd like to ask you to begin with a brief biographical sketch of where you came from, what brought you to Alaska, what you did here and why you left Alaska.

MR. PRUITT: I was born on the eastern shore of Maryland, accidentally you might say. A good part of my early childhood was spent in northern Virginia on a farm. I went to the University of Maryland. Then I went to the University of Michigan for a Masters and Ph. D. The year I got my degree there were absolutely no openings in vertebrate zoology anywhere in North America. I couldn't find anything so I took a post-Doctoral fellowship on the George Reserve of the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology. Then I got a job with the U. S. Air Force. It was with the Arctic Air Medical Lab. I gave it a lot of thought because after having been over three years in the U. S. Army I was leery of getting associated with them again. Nevertheless, it was a chance to go north. It was a chance to go to Alaska. Any field biologist would give anything to have the chance to go to Alaska. Of course, as a part of the job, it was fieldwork. That's how I came to Alaska.

MR. KAYE: You got a job here at the University [UA] as a Professor, I believe?

DR. PRUITT: Yeah, later on.

MR. KAYE: Tell me about that.

DR. PRUITT: That was when Project Chariot was first introduced to the world with [Edward] Teller coming to Alaska with his grandiose plans and his vision that if you've got a mountain in the wrong place 'just drop us a card, and we'll move it for you'! They were proposing opening up this harbor in northwestern Alaska near Cape Thompson. There were several us, not only with the University, but closely associated together, who felt that this would be another good chance for us to get some really good fieldwork. We insisted that the nuclear explosion be preceded and followed by a long and carefully thought out series of biological fieldwork. This would be in order to see the conditions before hand and the conditions after the explosion: to see the changes in vegetation and animals of the area, as well as in the people of the area. That was the situation. But that came up in 1959. Before that, the Arctic Air Medical Lab was on its way out. They were changing over to a lot of different things. I took a contract with the Canadian Wildlife Service to work out in the big Caribou Survey. This is right after the discovery of the crash of the [unintelligible] Caribou and it's affects on the people. It was about August of 1957, through September of 1958 that I was in northern Canada with my wife

and young daughter. She was still a baby then. We went in to northern Manitoba and lived in an abandoned Hudson Bay Company post at Duck Lake. We then moved over to Stony Rapids, Saskatchewan for the winter work. In the northern Saskatchewan, and the southern part of the south-central Northwest Territories we followed the Caribou on up to the [sounds like] Brelaun and as they began to come back down in about August they completed the annual cycle of the season with the [Bering Brown?] Caribou. We had lived in the field in tents and followed them by moving camp by aircraft. In the wintertime, we followed and moved our camp and did field work by dog team. I can say that that was the happiest year I have ever spent in my life, before or after. Living in the bush in a tent with a woodstove and with a toboggan and a team of about eight to ten dogs. We were going out every morning visiting the Caribou, or in my case, I was deeply involved in snow studies at that time. It was just pure joy that we were seeing the annual cycle of the seasons. And seeing the winter progress as I was following the snow covering; seeing it build up, measuring temperatures, following triggers, making a lot of detailed snow observations on thickness, hardness and density of the snow. I was following all of this day-to-day to see how this correlated with weather conditions and things like that, and also how the Caribou reacted to it. That was a real great experience.

MR. KAYE: Before we go on, I wanted to ask you about some childhood influences that may have lead you to this kind of work, and these kinds of interests. You mentioned to me earlier that Earnest Thompson Seton was an influence; can you tell me a little about that?

DR. PRUITT: When I was a kid in northern Virginia on the farm, I had gotten access to Seton's books and *Wolf in the Woods* and *Two Little Savages* and *Wild Animals I have Known* and all of that. I just ate that up. I wasn't very much of a good farm boy because I would goof off of the work whenever I could. I would get out in the woods and spend all afternoon or all day out away from people watching critters and trying to learn about them and learning how to identify tracks and things like that. Yes, Seton was, I think, the prime influence on my development. I think I can say pretty carefully that the lives and careers of practically every field biologist that I know, has been influenced greatly by the writings of Earnest Thompson Seton. I have brought this up in my classes through the years. I told them that if they want to make a gift to their grade school, high school, or university they can do no better than to make sure that the school library has the complete set of Seton books. I followed this up, even in later years; I think I am still an Advisor on the Board of the Earnest Thompson Seton Institute, which is a group down in the States and here in Canada trying to preserve and distribute the ideals that Seton expressed.

MR. KAYE: What were those ideals? I understand that was a genre that took a rather romantic view of predators and other animals that weren't well liked at the time.

DR. PRUITT: Well, it's not a romantic view of predators, no; you've got to remember that when Seton was coming along, there was no such thing as a good wolf, there was no such thing as a good coyote. The only good wolf was a dead wolf. Yet, Seton resisted this stoutly enough that he did have Lobo and Lanka and critters like that looked on all of the mammals and predatory birds from an entirely different view than was presently noted. We today have a difficult time envisioning what was going on then because we have all kinds of wonderful work on wolfs and a lot of good scientific data that has been gathered. We have numerous and exceedingly skilled wildlife artists. We can get calendars of visions and photographs of wolves. You can also get good publications on them. None of this was going on during the time when Seton was coming along and when he was doing his writing. It was an entirely different wolf world that he lived in, as opposed to the wolf world that we live in today. He was a very important in telling the story of Lobo, the very fact of Lobo and the killing of Lobo. That hit a lot of people my age, coming along. It really struck deep into our psyche.

MR. KAYE: Interesting! Tell me why you left Alaska. You worked up here, actually on the Arctic Refuge. I looked up your testimony to a Senate Committee and found that you talked about working Old John Lake in the early 1950's and around Kaktovik. Maybe first tell me, what did you do in those years in Alaska, before you worked on Project Chariot?

DR. PRUITT: I have always been, and still am, interested in cyclic fluctuations and population changes in small mammals. When I was with the military I had a chance to hitch a ride on a military aircraft to any and all of the outlying areas, which were radar sites and things like that. Nobody else could get to them. I took advantage of that by setting up a series of sampling plots at various places that were down in the Alaska Range and up in the northeast Brooks Range at Old John Lake; south of Barrow on the Meade River, out on the Seward Peninsula, south of Kotzebue (actually out of St. Lawrence Island). I had a plot out there. I took advantage by visiting them as close to a regular schedule as I could. I was sampling the small mammals in a standardized fashion. I got a lot of good information out of that.

MR. KAYE: Is that what you were doing out of Old John Lake?

DR. PRUITT: Yeah.

MR. KAYE: In terms of you participation in, and the heroic role that you played in the project; does the book *Firecracker Boys* accurately describe your role in that project and what you did?

DR. PRUITT: I think so, yeah. [Hesitantly laughing]

MR. KAYE: So in a statement then; why did you leave Alaska?

DR. PRUITT: Well, the Atomic Energy Commission, in connivance with the University of Alaska made sure that I could not get a job in Alaska. When I tried to check the situation at the University of Montana, it was pretty clear then that I wasn't ever going to be able to get a job in the U. S. doing what I loved to do; field biological work. So then I had to take off and emigrate. I've been damn happy that I did.

MR. KAYE: It's often said that your allegiance was to science and not to the University or any sponsoring or funding organization.

DR. PRUITT: That's right. Any scientist has to have that kind of a sequence of allegiances.

MR. KAYE: Let's move on to the Arctic Refuge then. I'd like to ask you; I've seen quite a number of documents in the Archives written by you regarding the proposed Arctic Refuge. You testified in support of it. You wrote in support of it. Then, after it was established you had a number of ideas for its management. What were some of the values that the area held? Why did you get so involved in the campaign to protect this place?

DR. PRUITT: I think for two reasons; one, that it was relatively untouched by modern humans. Inuit people had been going in to the area sporadically, but modern people had very little contact with it. This was mainly because it was before the advent of the bush plane. It was so darn hard to get in to. Then, to try to have any way of getting around and getting across it, it had to be all on foot. Some of that country is exceedingly difficult to traverse. That was one of the reasons that it was the most untouched area in North America. Another way to put it is that it was the least influenced by human activity of any area in North America. I think it still holds to that.

Also, because of that it had a complete set of mammals and birds. If offered tremendous opportunities in the future for research, as a sampling area. The whole essence of experimental science is that you have a control area, or control site whether it's in a test tube or whether it is several thousand square kilometers. Then you have another area, which you modify in some way by your experiment. If it's in the test tube you may heat it, or chill it, or add this, or subtract from it. If it's in a natural area, you can modify some sort of regime in it, whether it be trapping, or tourism, or fishing or something like that. No change, or no study of a change, whether it is due to a different traveling regime that you want to institute or some other change; none of that is worth a damn unless you have a control area with which you can compare it. That's why I still say today that there is no wildlife management in North America! We don't have large enough untouched control areas to compare it with. And also, the people that come up in wildlife management instruction through the universities and various schools are not

taught this. This is the basis of all scientific experimentation. That was my main interest in agitating for the formation and preservation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

MR. KAYE: A lot of people talked about the specific wildlife values; of course the Caribou and the big, charismatic animals, it seems that you are interested in ecological and evolutionary processes. This was a place that natural process could go on. Is that correct?

DR. PRUITT: Yes that strikes very close to my ideas on it.

MR. KAYE: And as far as the evolutionary part, your ecological interests are very well described in your book *Wild Harmony* and so on; what value is this place as a theater or laboratory of natural evolution? Can you expound on that a little bit?

DR. PRUITT: It goes back to my ideas of the necessity of a control area. You can only learn about what is really going on in nature by having an undisturbed area where you can see and study the relationship between animals and between animals and plants and between the plants themselves. You can have all the nice areas that are close to a big city or something like that, but unless you have the complete sweep of all of these wild animals and plants, and all of the birds, you really are missing something. This is something I have carried on at great lengths with my colleagues in Scandinavia. They have come up with a number of ideas, but I have spent two sabbatical years out in the bush and I've been over practically all of northern Sweden and northern Norway as well. They don't have anything like this at all because they got rid of the large carnivores. So all of their conclusions about populations of wild Reindeer or something like that are irrelevant to natural conditions because they don't have a natural condition. That's the reason that I am so desperate to try to get money to endow a Chair in the Natural History of the Arboreal Forest, centered at [sounds like] Myatyga Biological Station. As far as I know we are the only terrestrial biological station in Canada, which is in an area, where we have a complete sweep of all of the pre-contact fauna. We have everything from wolves and wolverines, down to the chipmunks and various species of mice. It is an extremely valuable area.

MR. KAYE: In reading your book *Wild Harmony* and in reading your letter to Irvin Nelson, dated early in 1961 you offered a number of suggestions for uses and an approach towards this new Arctic Range. I'd like to read a statement you made here; you said, "Another aspect that must be noted is that it's the Arctic Wildlife Range, there is no mention of game. Therefore all forms of wildlife are to receive the same careful consideration and respect." Tell me about your thought on that in terms of all life forms being equal; is that what you are saying?

DR. PRUITT: Well, it depends on what you mean by 'equal'.

MR. KAYE: Maybe by equal value. What do you feel in terms of that?

DR. PRUITT: All life forms have evolved, and have roles in the system, the ecosystem, dependent on their evolutionary capabilities and their characteristics. In this respect, each of them fulfills these different roles. And each role is of equal importance. I am sort of uncomfortable with what some of the people who describe "keystone species". To my way of thinking, all species are keystone species. That's why I was insistent, from my point of view, on calling it a "wildlife range" and not a "game range". 'Game' implied that certain species are more important than others. That's not the way nature should be. That's not the way nature is!

MR. KAYE: Is this same letter to Irvin Nelson in which you are offering your suggestions of this newly established range, and after your involvement in that; the first paragraph is interesting to me. You emphasize, and I'll quote you here, "There was a strong feeling for true wilderness in this region, and that lead to its establishment." You go on to say, "Since such strong feelings for wilderness exist, it would be well to remember in all of the actions, and make doubly certain that nothing is done in the immediate future that may jeopardize the future re-classification and upgrading of the status of the area to that of a full wilderness area."

DR. PRUITT: That was when it still had the title "Artic National Game Range". I was hoping to get rid of that and call it the "Wildlife Range", which did happen.

MR. KAYE: In another document, this is actually to the Regional Director, Irvin Nelson, and to Dave Spencer; you are proposing a study. You introduce it by talking about the ultimate aim in management of this area is to "preserve its wilderness character". What might have you meant in talking about the 'wilderness character' being the main aspect of this area?

DR. PRUITT: It was wild. That means that it had it's own rationale for being. The main rationale for being was *not* influenced by human activities outside of it. It was allowed to go ahead and be, and it sounds silly, to be what nature intended.

MR. KAYE: So, are you saying that it had an intrinsic value, a value in itself?

DR. PRUITT: It had a value in itself, regardless of whether what went on there may have shocked our sensibilities if we were only familiar with…like down in the Wichita Mountain Refuge where I spent some time…the whole thing is bound around the Bison and the Long Horn and things like that. Very definitely, they would have looked askance at having a wolf den with a pack [nearby]. That should be the normal course of events in the Arctic National Wildlife Range. The wolves, the wolverines and other critters would be allowed to behave and interact as they had evolved to be.

MR. KAYE: Related to that, in your different writings, I get a sense of respect or perhaps reverence and restraint and humility in relation to the natural world that perhaps wasn't very common in those days of the 1950's. Is that a correct sense?

DR. PRUITT: That's very true.

MR. KAYE: Maybe you could tell me a little bit about your attitude, or that sense of what you felt was appropriate towards this place?

DR. PRUITT: Well, I thought at that time, and I still think that it's probably the most valuable bit of real estate in North America. Because it has been allowed to continue operating as it evolved. I know very well that there have been incursions into the area by some of these hunting and fishing types, sending in and killing wolves by airplane. Of course, this was not officially known, but nonetheless, it has happened. This is a very small bit, and it has been infrequent enough so that the animals have recovered. There is a large enough area of real sanctuary in the middle of it that is untouched. That's why the size of it is so important. It could not be reduced in size in any way, or you'll loose protection. That's why I get so annoyed with these [expletive] guys supporting the President who want to go in and drill for oil. [unintelligible]…eighteen years not matter how much you take out, or something like that? You sacrifice all of the post-Pleistocene time before just a short bit of material to drive your SUVs with.

MR. KAYE: In many of your writings, and particularly your testimony to the Senate Committee hearings that were held in 1959 in Fairbanks, you talking about the future generations quite a bit; "planning wisely for their needs", and your referenced the "next generation". Is this kind of bequest value important to you at the time?

DR. PRUITT: Yes. It was sort of a hazy vision of the future with population increases and resource use increases. We see, and I've seen that this has come true with what I just mentioned. Now that people want to take the easy way out and invade this marvelous refuge that has been there, just for a short-term gain for a few people. I think that that vision of mine has unfortunately become a reality.

MR. KAYE: Are there any other values that this place held for you, or thoughts about it, that may have motivated you or been part of your reason for getting involved in this effort?

DR. PRUITT: I don't know about any others. I think we've pretty well covered it. A lot of people get all misty-eyed when they talk about these 'spiritual values' of wilderness and things like that. I don't…my psyche just doesn't allow me that kind of an approach to life, or to the world.

MR. KAYE: Ok, let's talk about some of the people that you met, or worked with during those days on the campaign. I know you knew Olaus and Marty Murie; what was your impression of them and their interest in this area?

DR. PRUITT: Well, you know the expression, "the salt of the earth". I think that those two people were absolutely the best humans I have ever met. I never knew Seton personally. I was a kid in an auditorium one time when Seton talked. I wasn't even sitting on my seat. I think I must have been levitated an inch or two above the seat; I was so excited. He was the only person that ever approached Olaus and Marty in their affect on me.

MR. KAYE: What was that affect? What inspired you about them?

DR. PRUITT: Olaus would come out and put his spin on the situation that was so different from most peoples, but as soon as he said it you thought, "why the hell didn't I think of that?"

MR. KAYE: George Schaller was active; he was a student when you were probably teaching at the University, wasn't he?

DR. PRUITT: Yes, George was there.

MR. KAYE: What was your impression of George? Was there any indication back when he was a student that he would become the prominent biologist he became?

DR. PRUITT: I think so. I remember that we'd have the students over to our cabin every once in a while. To me it was quite apparent that George had a vision and he was the kind of person who was certainly going to direct his energies towards achieving that, and I think he has.

MR. KAYE: Maybe we could talk a little bit about the Alaska Conservation Society; I know it was established around the Arctic Refuge campaign and you were involved. You were a Charter Member of it weren't you?

DR. PRUITT: Yes.

MR. KAYE: Who were some of the people that you worked with there?

DR. PRUITT: There was Celia and Ginny.

MR: KAYE: Tell me about those two. I see they did quite a bit, testifying and writing about this place.

DR. PRUITT: There was Martin Wittiwood. They were the strong workhorses, particularly Celia. She was a strong workhorse of the whole organization. When things needed to be done, why, Celia would be doing them when nobody else was jumping forward to do it. She was a crackerjack.

MR. KAYE: Is there anyone else from those days that you recall?

DR. PRUITT: Bob Wheedon was in on it. Oh let's see, that was a long time ago.

MR. KAYE: Well, I'm asking you to go back of a century, and that's an awful lot I realize! I know that you worked with Les Verrick on the …

DR. PRUITT: Yes, and Donald Foote and I were cohorts who were called "the gang of four".

MR. KAYE: Finally then, an open ended question about your sense of the value of this place to the future; and any other things you want to say about the Arctic Refuge. You did tell me quite a bit about the scientific value that it holds. Is there any thing else that you'd like to add?

DR. PRUITT: Well, the fact that we are getting more and more people on this earth, and consequently, the pressure for using various resources is increasing. It doesn't seem like humans are able to control their population, or to control their desire to have unlimited resources. That's why it has become so very, very important that the protection for this area continues and is increased in order to resist the urge of people who are anxious for a quick buck, to get in and make that quick buck. We've got to resist that.

MR. KAYE: Some people have described the establishment of this refuge as almost a reactionary movement against what is sometimes considered I guess, an arrogance of people towards the landscape and development and so on.

DR. PRUITT: I think that rather than reactionary it is far visionary. I think that it is visionary instead of being reactionary, forward thinking rather than reaction, which is basically looking backwards to the 'good old days'. The good old days weren't very good after all.

MR. KAYE: Well, Dr. Pruitt, I really want to thank you for this time.